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Drama and Catholic Themes

Ed Block Jr.

PART OF THE challenge and satisfaction of teaching the Catholic intellectual tradition in literature comes from exploring and integrating developments in theology with literary studies of different genres. This essay uses key terms from Fr. Thomas Rausch's and Dr. Lawrence Cunningham's essays that reveal "some core elements of Catholic theology" together with insights from the dramatic criticism of Hans Urs von Balthasar and applies both to two highly acclaimed and eminently teachable plays: Robert Bolt's 1960 *A Man for All Seasons* and Brian Friel's 1990 *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Adapting Cunningham's view of theology's purpose, we might say that literature reflects imaginatively on both human experience and, analogously, religious experience. I explore human and religious experience in the plays by Bolt and Friel and analyze how these plays address the question Rausch poses: "What is the life that God calls us to?" or, put more simply, What constitutes the "good life"? Before approaching the two plays, however, it is helpful to review a bit of background on dramatic criticism.

By its nature, drama is the most "incarnational" of the literary genres. For its full realization, it needs to be "enfleshed" or "incarnated." That is, it requires literal, physical impersonation of the playwright's characters by live actors and actresses: real human beings, in a genuine space, speaking human language in dialogue, while their bodies move about the stage. Depending on the style and era of the drama, there will be more or less emphasis on historical place and time and on

props meant to suggest the real world. Though the play on stage is itself, it is also a metaphor or sign of something beyond itself, something "self-transcending."

THEODRAMA

The late Swiss theologian and literary scholar Hans Urs von Balthasar entitled the second part of his great theological trilogy *Theo-Drama*. In it he argues that from a human and religious perspective, life needs to be understood as a drama of God's action in the world. Von Balthasar's Catholic anthropology is founded on a dialogical model that originates in the mother-child relationship and is related to Martin Buber's insights in *I and Thou*. *Theo-Drama* also emphasizes the tensions that exist between what is personal and what is societal or communal. This leads von Balthasar to highlight the roles we play as individuals and as members of society. He also calls attention to the different "horizons" within which human beings live and act: the finite or horizontal horizon and the infinite or vertical horizon.

The first volume of *Theo-Drama*, subtitled *Prolegomena*, is a long and sophisticated reading of Western drama from its origins to the late twentieth century. In it von Balthasar identifies key concepts and terminology which he then uses to construct a theodramatic theology. Though the book is too long to summarize, a few general insights from that *Prolegomena* are useful in analyzing how elements of the Catholic intellectual tradition play out in Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* and Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

Von Balthasar first emphasizes the revelatory nature of drama: "In the theatre [the hu]man [being] attempts to [achieve] a kind of transcendence, endeavoring both to observe and to judge her/his own truth, in virtue of a transformation—through the dialectic of the concealing-revealing mask—by which s/he tries to gain clarity about her/himself. The human being beckons, invites the approach of a revelation about her/himself." Elsewhere he glosses this initial claim, saying, "In and through the temporal 'play' as such we can glimpse (but not seize hold of) an eternal meaning."¹ From a distinctively philosophical perspective he notes:

Nowhere is the character of existence demonstrated more clearly than in stage drama: we are drawn to watch it, and initially it is immaterial whether, in doing so, we are searching for or fleeing from ourselves, immaterial whether the performance is showing us the serious- or the play-dimension, the destructive or the transfiguring aspect, the absurdity or the hidden profundity of our life. Probably nowhere else but in this interplay of relationships (which is of the essence of the theatre) can we see so clearly the

questionable nature and ambiguity not only of the theatre but also of existence itself, which the theatre illuminates.²

Both "clarity about oneself" and the interplay of relationships have central import in *A Man for All Seasons* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*. This self-knowledge is the "eternal meaning" to which von Balthasar refers. It often takes the form of a sense of wholeness that allows individuals to enter into relationship with God and their neighbor.

Von Balthasar finds particularly Catholic elements in a wide range of plays from the early modern period on. From the early modern period he cites Shakespeare and other Renaissance dramas, particularly the work of Pedro Calderón de la Barca. He has special praise for Calderón's *Three Retributions in One* and *Life Is a Dream*. He also finds Catholic elements in unlikely places throughout the drama of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, from Goethe and Schiller to Ibsen and Shaw, and even in the likes of Bertolt Brecht, Eugene Ionesco, and Albert Camus's stage adaptation of William Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*.

In the early twentieth century the Catholic Renaissance in France produced such writers as Georges Bernanos, Charles Péguy, and Paul Claudel. Claudel masterfully wove Catholic themes into his works, especially *The Satin Slipper*. Although in most situations it is far too long to produce or even read, *The Satin Slipper* remains a standard against which any Catholic drama may be measured.

Paul Claudel was a diplomat and world traveler whose horizon was nothing less than the terrestrial globe and the vault of heaven. Set in the Golden Age of Spain, the Age of Discovery, *The Satin Slipper* tells the tale of enduring love between Doña Prouheze and Rodrigo. Although Doña Prouheze acknowledges her love for Rodrigo, she refuses his advances. Instead of responding, she hangs her satin slipper on a saint's statue as a symbol of her desire to be holy. Unrequited, Rodrigo goes off to the New World to try to forget his love for Doña Prouheze, while Prouheze returns to her cruel husband, Don Camillo, and a marriage filled with suffering.

Rodrigo spends years in ambitious conquest, digging a canal from the Atlantic to the Pacific. He also attempts to rescue Prouheze from the coast of Africa, where her uncaring husband has imprisoned her. At the end of his life he is a prisoner on a ship run by a Carmelite nun. He is still in love with Doña Prouheze, who has died, and it is this abiding love that purifies Rodrigo's soul before he too dies. The play is full of Catholic pageantry and Catholic themes. Notes of courageous and kenotic love are struck early in the first act, with Rodrigo's Jesuit brother, who dies at sea, but they suffuse the entire play.

In writing *Murder in the Cathedral* and other plays in the 1930s, T. S. Eliot brought verse back to drama. Christopher Fry adopted Eliot's style and some of his

sensibility, creating a number of religious dramas, including *A Sleep of Prisoners* and *The Lady's Not for Burning*. In the 1940s the French existentialist philosopher Gabriel Marcel wrote and produced such plays as *A Man of God* and *The Broken World* that placed Catholics in critical decision-making situations. In these works he explored the complexities of belief and relationship. At around the same time in the United States, Thornton Wilder wrote and produced a number of plays, including *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, that were imbued with a Catholic sensibility. Many readers and playgoers also find a Catholic sensibility in the almost nostalgic longing for the blessedness of everyday life implicit in Eugene O'Neill's only acknowledged comedy, *Ah! Wilderness*.³

A revival in British drama during the second half of the twentieth century brought to the stage a number of important plays dealing with belief, worship, and damnation. Notable among these are two plays by Peter Shaffer, *Equus* and *Amadeus*. In *Equus* a lonely and troubled adolescent, Alan Strang, fashions a strange religion that allows him to indulge his fascination with horses. The son of an atheist father and an Evangelical Christian mother, Alan devises a religion of *Equus* that is a complex protest against his parents, particularly their exaggerated responses to the divine. His religion also stands in stark contrast to the vacuity of mid-twentieth-century secular culture. Martin Dysart is Alan's empathetic psychiatrist. A man with an avocational interest in Greek antiquities, Dysart struggles to find meaning in his chosen profession. Even while helping Alan to regain "normalcy," Dysart is ambivalent about what he is doing. He envies Alan's "religion," which valorizes genuine passion and satisfies what Dysart admits is a primal human need for worship. Once he has put Alan on the road to improved mental health, he is haunted by the image and the mystery of *Equus*. In his final speech Dysart says, "I need . . . a way of seeing in the dark. What way is this? . . . *What dark is this?* . . . I cannot call it ordained of God: I can't get that far. I will however pay it so much homage."⁴

In *Amadeus* Shaffer portrays another "god-haunted" character, Antonio Salieri. Salieri is a contemporary and rival of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. While he is envious of Mozart's stunning musical abilities, he is also deeply angry with God for having favored this "spoiled child." The play is confessional in tone and is set at the end of Salieri's life. *Amadeus* dramatizes the many efforts Salieri made to undermine and destroy Mozart's career and the intense envy that fueled those efforts. At the end of his life Salieri rails against a God who could allow such transcendently beautiful music to come from the likes of a "spiteful, sniggering, conceited, infantine Mozart." He offers a personal defense of sorts at the same time that he angrily accuses God: "Until this day I have pursued virtue with rigor. I have labored long hours to relieve my fellow men. I have worked and

worked the talent You allowed me. [Calling up] You know how hard I've worked! Solely that in the end, in the practice of the art, which alone makes the world comprehensible to me, I might hear Your Voice. And now I do hear it—and it says only one name: MOZART!"⁵

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

During this time, Athol Fugard wrote two plays with subtle and compelling religious themes. In both *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *MASTER HAROLD... and the Boys*, Fugard develops the underlying theme of long-suffering, kenotic love. But among these mid-twentieth-century plays, Robert Bolt's 1960 play, *A Man for All Seasons*, stands out. The play is set during several climactic weeks in the life of the martyr St. Thomas More, chancellor to King Henry VIII. Both the play and the later screenplay portray the Catholic sensibility "on trial."⁶ The English agnostic Bolt was both a playwright and a popular screenwriter, perhaps best known for his screenplays of *Dr. Zhivago*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *A Man for All Seasons*, and *The Mission*, a 1986 film about Jesuit "reductions" (missions) in South America during the eighteenth century.

While *A Man for All Seasons* hews close to the historical record,⁷ it also develops the complexity of More's character, placing him in a variety of situations that reveal his "clarity about himself" and his courageous response to grace. But the play also starkly reveals the moral, spiritual brokenness or sinfulness of the characters with whom he interacts. Like *The Satin Slipper*, *A Man for All Seasons* maintains a strong sense of what von Balthasar termed the "vertical" horizon. More personifies a Catholic whose God is always present and active in both the private and public realms of his life.

Set in about 1530, when Lutheranism is spreading in England, the play opens at the death of King Henry VIII's chancellor, Cardinal Wolsey. Henry is seeking to have his marriage to Catherine of Aragon dissolved so he can marry his mistress, Anne Boleyn. In order to marry his brother's widow (Catherine of Aragon) in the first place, Henry had sought and received a dispensation from Rome. However, Catherine failed to provide Henry with a male heir, and it is on these grounds that he hopes to receive another dispensation. The death of Wolsey provides an unexpected opportunity to enhance Henry's position with Rome. He appoints his friend, Thomas More, chancellor and assumes that More will give "token acquiescence" to the dissolution of his marriage.

At the time the play takes place, More is at the height of his power, reputation, and influence. A member of Parliament, the author of *Utopia*, an international best-seller, and a friend of the famous, Thomas More is a rock star of his time. His

home is an estate on the Thames River in Chelsea, a few miles by boat from London. There he lives, plays, and prays with his family and instructs his children, including his much beloved daughter Meg. On occasion More also welcomes Henry as his guest and entertains him with his witty conversation. When the play opens, More and his family are truly enjoying the good life, or what Cunningham terms the "graced life." Despite the difficulties that mount in the play and eventually envelop these characters, the grace in their lives endures.

The character of Richard Rich provides a dramatic counterpoint to the courage, grace, and self-knowledge we see exemplified in More. Rich is a young would-be courtier who seeks More's patronage and advancement at court. In discussing a bribe he refused, More warns Rich of the opportunities to accept even larger bribes that abound in London. As they converse, Rich begins to display the lack of self-knowledge and moral weakness that ultimately define him. Later in the play he implores More to hire him, but because More understands that such a position would put Rich in moral jeopardy, he refuses. As a way to avoid the temptations of court and public life, More instead urges Rich to accept a teaching position. In the climactic moment of a moving scene, More clearly identifies the weakness of character that Rich is unable to see in himself:

RICH: (desperately) Employ me!

MORE: No!

RICH: (moves swiftly to exit: turns there) I would be steadfast!

MORE: Richard, you couldn't answer for yourself even so far as tonight. (40)

Rich's character is clearly revealed in this scene. But so too is More's concern for a young man seeking his aid.

Henry VIII's secretary, Thomas Cromwell, appears in Bolt's play with a weak character and questionable morality. Cromwell is intensely ambitious. All that matters to him is protecting his position by providing "administrative convenience" for the king. Moral weakness coalesces in the play when Rich accepts an offer from Cromwell that provides a tempting opportunity to advance his career, but at great moral cost.

The crisis of Act I comes when Henry visits More in Chelsea and asks for his support in divorcing the queen. Once the king realizes he cannot persuade More to betray his conscience, the king backs off: "Your conscience is your own affair; but you are my Chancellor! There, you have my word—I'll leave you out of it. But I don't take it kindly, Thomas, and I'll have no opposition" (35).

In the conversations with his family that follow the king's departure, More makes it clear that he will rely on his God-given wits to thread his way through the

mounting crisis. He hopes that by combining deft use of the law with silence on the matter of the king's divorce he will be able to save his family and himself.

More's decision to resign the chancellorship is a key scene in Act II. When the Duke of Norfolk announces that all the English bishops except one have accepted the oath of supremacy that makes Henry the head of the Church of England, More prepares to remove his chain of office. This act shows that More has great clarity about himself and how he relates to God. But it also underscores the extent to which he understands and values his relationships with those around him.

At first More asks his wife for help with the chain. Dame Alice fairly fumes, "God's blood and body *no!* Sun and moon, Master More, you're taken for a wise man! Is this wisdom to betray your ability, abandon practice, forget your station and your duty to your kin and behave like a printed book?" (55-56). Rebuffed, More turns to his daughter Meg, who helps him. Speaking up, the Duke of Norfolk says the resignation looks like "cowardice," but More responds that the king has "declared war on the Pope." In Norfolk's response he implies that the pope is just another political leader. More agrees, but says, "He's also the Vicar of God, the descendant of St. Peter, our only link with Christ" (57).

The duke scorns the "tenuous link" with Christ: "You'll forfeit all you've got—which includes the respect of your country—for a theory?" More, ever the lawyer, pauses and ponders. Then he says, "Why, it's a theory, yes; you can't see it; can't touch it; it's a theory. But what matters to me is not whether it's true or not but that I believe it to be true, or rather not that I *believe* it, but that I believe it. . . . I trust I make myself obscure?" With obvious irony Norfolk says "Perfectly!" More replies, "That's good. Obscurity's what I have need of now" (57). In this short exchange More demonstrates the depth and the source of his convictions and his integrity. Because his faith is utterly real to him, he is ready to give up all earthly wealth as well as "the respect of [his] country." But he is not eager for death. Rather he hopes to save himself by using his intelligence and knowledge of the law.

A bit later, an exchange with his future son-in-law, Will Roper, further clarifies the nature of More's action. Roper congratulates him, saying, "Sir, you've made a noble gesture" (58). More denies the claim energetically. Thumbing his nose, he says, "*That's* a gesture," and jerking up two fingers, "*That's* a gesture. I'm no street acrobat to make gestures! I'm practical." Roper responds, "You belittle yourself, sir, this was not practical; this was moral!" To which More replies, "Oh now I understand you, Will. Morality's not practical. Morality's a gesture. A complicated gesture learned from books—that's what you say, Alice, isn't it? . . . And you, Meg?" His daughter's response might apply to many in the audience as well: "It is, for most of us, Father" (59). More's words demonstrate that resigning his office is a genuine human action, deriving from his self-knowledge and necessitated by principles,

conscience, and the reality to which his faith points. He knows his contextualized self and judges himself by his actions.

A short time later More dismisses part of his household because he can no longer afford so many servants. In this scene he once again reveals the clarity of his realism with respect to himself and others. He tells his steward, Matthew, that he will have to cut his wages and asks, "Will you stay?" When Matthew declines, More says, "I shall miss you, Matthew." Matthew demurs, "You never had much time for me, sir. You see through me, sir. I know that." But More gently repeats, "I shall miss you, Matthew; I shall miss you" (60).

When More leaves, the steward fumes, "*Miss me? ... What's in me for him to miss ... ?*" The stage directions are "*(Suddenly he cries out like one who sees a danger at his very feet.)*" He then repeats More's words, "'Matthew, will you kindly take a cut in your wages?' 'No, Sir Thomas, I will not.' That's it and (*fiercely*) that's all of it!" More's expression of genuine love is too much for Matthew to acknowledge. Rather than accept More's love with its pain-filled possibilities, Matthew opts for an exclusively material interpretation that affords the protective emotional response of anger. This strategy is more than familiar to many twenty-first-century readers and audiences, and is similar to how More's family sometimes knowingly misunderstands his motives and actions. Matthew responds in anger, blind to his own self-worth and unable and unwilling to believe the lawyer's honest words of love.

Later More explains to his dear Meg and Roper his strategy for staying out of danger himself. He posits the strategy on the human being's God-given gifts:

God made the *angels* to show him splendour—as he made animals for innocence and plants for their simplicity. But Man he made to serve him wittily, in the tangle of his mind! If he suffers us to fall to such a case that there is no escaping, then we may stand to our tackle as best we can, and yes, Will, then we may clamour like champions ... if we have the spittle for it. And no doubt it delights God to see splendour where he only looked for complexity. But it's God's part, not our own, to bring ourselves to that extremity! Our natural business lies in escaping. (78)

More's view of human nature is humble, shrewd, and biblical. In the ordinary course of life, human beings, made in the image and likeness of God, serve God best by using their minds. It is only in meeting an inescapable trial that the human being, More hopes, can measure up to the angels' "splendour." More reminds Roper that "it's God's part" to bring a human being to the "extremity" of confessing his beliefs and embracing martyrdom, if he has "the spittle for it." More cooperates with God's grace in living the good life and in living wisely by his wits. As clouds

darken, he prepares to cooperate with God also in death, a task that in his case demands rather stunning moral courage.

In Act II More's fortunes are in decline, and he reveals himself to be cheerful even in poverty (69). He is detached. He says that his prison cell in the Tower of London is like any other place (86). When his daughter urges him to save himself and take the oath "and in your heart think otherwise" (87), More provides a final lesson that reveals both his self-knowledge and the depth of his faith: "When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water (*cups hands*) and if he opens his fingers *then*—he needn't hope to find himself again. Some men aren't capable of this, but I'd be loathe to think your father one of them" (87). In a few short sentences More affirms the conscience and selfhood of the individual person. In so doing he reminds the audience of the other characters in the play who "aren't capable of this," in stark contrast to him.

When More is finally brought into court, his final defense of conscience is also a defense of God's primacy in his life. In response to More's reference to "matters of conscience," Cromwell says he is "very used to hear it [the phrase] in the mouths of criminals." More responds with an analogy: "I am used to hear bad men misuse the name of God, yet God exists." He then returns to his defense: "In matters of conscience, the loyal subject is more bounden to be loyal to his conscience than to any other thing" (97). His final rejoinder applies as much in the twenty-first century as it did in an era of despotism: "What you have hunted me for is not my actions, but the thoughts of my heart. It is a long road you have opened. For first men will disclaim their hearts and presently they will have no hearts. God help the people whose Statesmen walk your road" (100).

Rausch observes that salvation is gained "not by fleeing from the world as something evil, but by living lives of faithful discipleship within it." The life of St. Thomas More, as depicted in *A Man for All Seasons*, manifests a very human attempt to lead a life of faithful discipleship even as the storm clouds of crises gather and threaten more and more people.

A Man for All Seasons can easily be read as a drama about how More gave up a temporal "good life" as Lord Chancellor and well-known gentleman of letters for an eternal "good life" with his Creator. More accepted this trade-off because of his conscience and his devotion to God and Church. Rausch reminds us, "Each of us must enter into the mystery of our own lives, in all our weakness and vulnerability, for it is precisely there that God's grace is to be found." In von Balthasar's terms, Bolt's play presents to readers and playgoers the drama of a person whose clarity about himself in relation to God and his fellow human beings is a witness to this "graced life." For More, life is as much graced in witty observations, good friends, esteem in the realm, and a loving family as in death.

DANCING AT LUGHNASA

For von Balthasar, Thornton Wilder's popular 1938 play *Our Town* is paradigmatic in another way that highlights clarity about self and understanding in relationships.⁸ For von Balthasar, Wilder's stage manager is an analogy of God. But the character is also an actor who takes part in the action that the play presents. Through his relatively more objective eyes and comments, the audience is able to see how life, human existence, and its meaning unfold. The stage manager enables readers and playgoers greater clarity about themselves to form that sense of wholeness that von Balthasar so values in drama. Six years after *Our Town*, Tennessee Williams uses a narrator, Tom Wingfield, to introduce his memory play, *The Glass Menagerie*.⁹ And almost fifty years after that, the dramatic use of the insider/outsider character is further developed by Brian Friel in *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

Friel was a schoolteacher in County Donegal, Ireland, in the 1950s before he began publishing short stories in the *New Yorker*. He also wrote radio plays and stage dramas. Around the time that Bolt wrote *A Man for All Seasons*, the British theatrical giant Sir Tyrone Guthrie invited Friel to work at his Tyrone Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. From this residency came Friel's first international success, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* In the next four decades he wrote almost two dozen plays, many of them concerned with Catholic Ireland and the Catholic worldview in which he grew up.

Dancing at Lughnasa (1990) plays deliberate variations on *The Glass Menagerie*.¹⁰ Both are flashback or memory plays. Friel uses his character Michael in the same way Williams uses Tom, as both narrator and character. This external perspective also echoes the role of the stage manager in *Our Town*. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, however, there is something more; Friel is trying to realize something like a von Balthasarian sense of wholeness that comprehends as it illuminates all of human existence, even its sufferings.

As current theory has pointed out, no artistic choice, especially the choice of narrator, is ideologically neutral. The choice of Michael in *Dancing at Lughnasa* is potentially nostalgic, but it also enables the von Balthasarian perspective. Even though the narrator's role occasionally spoils the suspense, one might view that role as Friel's way of unconsciously "enacting" God's absence and impotence (Rausch). Von Balthasar, and probably Friel, would accept the analogical relation between God (the "creative intelligence" behind the mystery of the universe, according to Rausch) and the artist, playwright, and narrator of the play.

Though *Lughnasa* is a memory play, the narrator stands above as well as within the play's actions. As a grown man, he is only mortal and cannot be completely sure which of his memories are real and which "illusory." But his response, both

empathetic and yet detached, invites the audience and reader into a bittersweet sense of wholeness and an active acceptance, if not affirmation, of foggy remembrances. In this process, Friel affirms the power of two fundamental human faculties, memory and imagination, to "real-ize" or at least "re-cognize" the wonder and the marvel, as well as the pain, of our fallen world.¹¹ In his quasi-objective role, Friel's narrator, like Wilder's stage manager, also makes us aware of the tension between appearance and reality, the ideal and the actual, especially in the characters Kate, Father Jack, and the sisters Rose and Agnes.

As Williams does with *The Glass Menagerie*, Friel sets *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the height of the Depression, on the eve of World War II. Like Williams's play, *Lughnasa* also focuses on a marginalized family with one challenged sibling. Other similarities include period music and dancing, religious allusions, betrayal, and even implicit abuse of a disabled female by a more powerful male, but such comparisons carry us only so far.

The action of *Dancing at Lughnasa* takes place on two afternoons in the late summer of 1938, in and around the Mundy sisters' rural cottage near Ballybeg, County Donegal. The family—Kate, Maggie, Agnes, Rose, and Christina, along with Christina's illegitimate son, Michael—have been surviving on Kate's teaching salary and piecework knitting done by Agnes and Rose. Maggie and Rose also tend chickens, and Rose cares for a pet rooster. As the play opens, the sisters are talking about the annual celebration of Lughnasa, a harvest ritual associated with the ancient Irish god Lugh. Michael is building two kites.

The family's routine life is punctuated by music from a newly purchased radio (dubbed "Marconi"), the recent return of the sisters' brother, Father Jack, from missionary work in Uganda, and, in a climactic moment, the brief reappearance of Michael's father, Gerry Evans. In Act II, a few weeks later, Gerry returns to bid goodbye before leaving for Spain and service in the International Brigade. Rose is absent at the opening of Act II, but reappears after an unexplained tryst in the hills with a married man, Danny Bradley. The play ends with a picnic outside the cottage, during which Gerry and Jack exchange hats in a mock-serious ritual "swap" patterned on Ugandan tribal ceremonies.

Lughnasa, unlike *A Man for All Seasons*, appears to focus primarily on "the events of ordinary human lives," which Rausch tells us mediate God's presence. Like Bolt, however, Friel sets his play in definable historical time, which is an implicitly Catholic acknowledgment of the reality and value of the world.¹² Friel also asserts his objectivity as a playwright by setting the play against a historical and international backdrop. With the apparent inevitability of history, events unfurl: the end of colonialism, the advent of World War II, and the effects of international depression in Ireland.

It would be easy to cast the play as, on one level, a contrast between modernity and an unreflective, historically limited Catholicism of the 1930s. As with many a quality Catholic writer's work, the superficial evidence of Catholicism in *Dancing at Lughnasa* may seem thin and deceiving. Talk of modesty, obscenity, Pope Pius XI, and the pope's views on marriage might invite such a view. But the apparently conventional religiosity of the Mundy sisters stands out precisely because it is set against the pagan practices of the back hills peasant folks and what we learn of the pagan practices in Jack's Ugandan congregation. Even Gerry Evans's unreflective pop superstitions remind us of the place that primitive folk beliefs have in the experience of ordinary people. Thus, on closer scrutiny, we notice a number of similarities among the sisters' religiosity, the festival of Lughnasa, and the Ugandan fertility rituals of the goddess Obi about which Jack speaks. Curiously, all these rituals seek in their own way to affirm, to celebrate life.

The deeper worldview of Catholicism in the play, a world of intrinsic meaning, is taken for granted. This manifests itself in the sisters' love and care for each other, for Christina's child, and for Jack. Even the sisters' cautious charity and somewhat halting hospitality toward Gerry Evans reflects a Catholic worldview. The sisters' Catholicism can also help explain some of the choices they make that give further meaning to their lives. Christina does not leave with Gerry. Rose does not run off with Danny. The sisters care for Jack, trying to understand his attitudes and accept his "otherness."

Because some of the choices made by the family run counter to romantic, easy answers, the whole family and the whole play seem both contradictory and bathed in mystery. Family members avoid modern solutions, such as running off with a lover or treating Jack as the family dunce. But the Catholic culture or motivation is not referenced as a determining factor. One might interpret some of the family members' decisions, such as Agnes's and Rose's decision to leave the family and Ireland, as exile in large part occasioned by forces beyond their control. Or we may see it as self-sacrificial, and ultimately and unintentionally self-destructive.

Rausch observes that we cannot look directly at God.¹³ To enable his readers and his audience to see what is not apparent, to see the mystery, Friel uses techniques of indirection. We catch a glimpse of God, or of mystery, out of the corner of our eye, as we would a fox disappearing in the tall grass at the edge of our yard. The celebration of Lughnasa and Jack's experience of Ugandan rituals remind us of the folly of trying to domesticate the divine.¹⁴

Rausch also refers to the "graced experience" from which all theological language arises. It is tempting to say that Friel, like all artists, seeks to call our attention to such graced experience, allowing us to glimpse the mystery that animates the scene, the situation, and the characters. As critics have noted, an artist

like Friel seeks to express, if not "capture," an experience that may be difficult to put into words.¹⁵ Friel seeks to embody the graced experience even as he points to its inevitable dissolution or loss. And what is that graced experience? It is the taste of the good life as experienced fleetingly but palpably by the members of a family in a small cottage in rural Ireland. It is graced because it points beyond itself to the ultimate good life of eternity. Yet behind and within these references to a transcendent reality, the fundamentally sacramental dimension of these people's lives can still be glimpsed.

The play abounds in paradox, reflecting the long-held Catholic belief that creation, including human nature, is, as Rausch reminds us, "both graced and flawed," "a world of damaged relationships" where human nature "under a veneer of civility and self-restraint still possesses those primitive instincts" that include "prejudice against the weak or the different." Another paradox concerns very ordinary features of the play. In *Lughnasa* plot, theme, and spectacle are unexceptional. Of the six classical parts of drama, however, it is music and spectacle that stand out. By giving greater prominence to music and spectacle than is currently fashionable in all but "musical theater," Friel actually achieves thematic complexity.¹⁶ Much of the play's thematic richness as well as its ambiguity are carried by the songs and dancing. Aided by Friel's almost always lyrical prose, the dancing and the music transform other aspects of the play as well.

As might be expected from the title, the play's two acts are highlighted by a number of contrasting dances. After the elder Michael's long opening monologue, the action begins with the child Michael and three of the sisters involved in household tasks. Even in the midst of an ordinary day, primitive instincts are evident. Rose does a "bizarre" and "abandoned" dance as she sings "The King of Abyssinia" while feeding her chickens. Kate returns from shopping to relay the news from Ballybeg. It is here that we learn that the Sweeney boy was severely burned while celebrating Lughnasa. Kate also describes the delight in the eyes of the shop girl Sophia McLaughlin when she tells about the "supreme" Lughnasa dance: "You'd think it was heaven she was talking about" (11). In a very real sense it is. Abandonment to the ritual of the dance allows participation in a joy well beyond the reality of the moment. To Kate, Lughnasa is "like a fever." In her uptightness she seems positively life-denying. But suddenly the radio, "Marconi," starts broadcasting Irish dance music, and, one by one, the sisters get up from their tasks and start to dance.

This first dance in the play is full of ambiguity. Friel's stage directions (referring to "masks," "near hysteria," "parody," "caricature," and "defiance") suggest just some of the possible meanings that a production might emphasize or an audience construe. Maggie's "instant mask" does not conceal her "defiance," "aggression," or

"crude mask of happiness." Perhaps a parodic reliving of the past, the dance has overtones of the pagan revelry taking place in the back hills. For Rose it is simple abandonment to the music. For Agnes the dance is a further revelation of her character, specifically her grace. Even for Kate the dance is an evocation or an embodiment "ominous of some deep and true emotion" (22).

Communal and yet personal, public or intensely private, it is probably fair to say that, for each of the characters, the dance has a special meaning. Their communal ritual of dancing together transforms the participants by knitting them together more closely. The ritual of the dance is not religious, but, as is true for a communal religious experience, it symbolizes, affirms, and encourages the participants even if it does not actually constitute solidarity and community.¹⁷

The first dance ends abruptly with each of the characters returning to her "ordinary self." Immediately the tensions and conflicts that had been suspended by the dancing reappear. But the memory of the ritual and its transformative power lingers. And yet the characters appear intent on denying whatever transcendent reality the dance embodied. Christina calls the radio a "bloody useless set," and this is picked up and exaggerated by Rose's parroting, "Goddam bloody useless" (22). Kate reasserts her authority, and the other sisters offer subtle rejoinders hinting at latent rebellion. It is Maggie who closes the scene by announcing the arrival of Gerry Evans.

Gerry Evans's first visit in thirteen months involves another series of rituals, ending in a second dance. Kate sounds the alarm. Gerry is not welcome; he has abandoned the woman he betrayed, along with the son she bore him, and Kate would have Christina "send him packing" (25). In time, charity—or is it only conventional, class-conscious hospitality?—prevails. Kate says, "Of course ask him in. And give the creature his tea" (25).

Gerry's dance with Christina (33) is formal, decorous, and as significant as the sisters' dance. It has many levels. Kate says, "He's leading her astray again." Maggie remarks, "Look at her face—she's easy led." To Kate, Gerry's "an animal," "a creature," and Christina "a fool." Yet even she admits that in their dancing "they're such a beautiful couple."

In the interplay of ritual and words Friel conveys subtlety and complexity in *Lughnasa*. While dancing with Christina, Gerry asks, "Do you know the words [to the song]?" She responds, "I never know any words." This response advances the play's paradoxical theme of words and wordlessness. Gerry then proposes marriage and Christina refuses, knowing that he would leave her again anyway. There is a sense of fatality in her response: "That's your nature and you can't help yourself" (33). Against his protestations, she says, "No more words. Just dance me down the lane and then you'll leave" (33).

After the dance Gerry leaves, and Jack enters, talking about Uganda, "ancestral spirits" (38), quinine addiction cured by a medicine man, and sacrificial rooster killing. As he tries to find the word ("exhibition," "demonstration," "spectacle?") for "a sacred and mysterious... ritual killing," the theme of wordlessness or the unspeakable reappears in a new form. A bit later his words underline the fragility of language as he observes, "Coming back [from Uganda] in the boat there were days when I couldn't remember even the simplest words" (40).¹⁸ Still, through the power of language, Jack is able to rename Michael's state. He is not "a child out of wed-lock," but "a love-child": "In Ryanga [his village in Uganda] women are eager to have love-children. The more love-children you have, the more fortunate your household is thought to be" (41). At the end of Jack's quasi-monologue, Kate reasserts her power and control by saying that, in Ireland, love-children "are not exactly the norm." The narrator's monologue that concludes Act I includes ominous news: a series of revelations, if not an anagnorisis.¹⁹

In Act II Jack, Gerry's return, and Rose's unexplained absence merely build suspense for the understated finale. The final scene, with its picnic and the comic exchange of hats, emphasizes the centrality of communal, as opposed to private or personal, values and actions. Nothing could be closer to the *koinonia* that is at the heart of Catholic reflection on the good life.²⁰ As Charles Taylor notes about the constituents of "the good life," "It is crucial to their being the goods they are that they be lived and enjoyed together, all the way from dance to conversation, to love, to friendship, to common self-rule."²¹

The final scene of the play takes place on one of the last warm, early autumn evenings. A Catholic sensibility is attuned to seasons, sacred and profane. Heightening the significance of the conclusion is its autumnal, elegiac tone. It would be straining to call the picnic "outside in the garden" (66) Eucharistic, but it does evoke prelapsarian contentment. Maggie offers sweet tea and caraway-seed and soda bread, with "only three eggs between the seven of us" (57), a possible allusion to the multiplication miracles in the gospels.²²

What is it these characters desire from life? The inexpressible! As he flirts with Agnes and Maggie, for one moment Gerry is again the rooster in a flock of hens. And they? They have the attention of a man already related to them through Christina. Like the dance in a Shakespeare comedy, this one proposes a sense of failed unity and integration. And then Rose enters to announce the death of her pet rooster, perhaps killed by a fox. The rooster's fate is symbolic of the death that always hovers nearby, ready to disrupt the normal rituals of life, like picnics, dances, and the like. The rooster, the male principle, who makes the hens lay eggs, is dead: an ominous, wordless portent of the coming death of Jack and the departure of Michael.

Gerry notices Michael's now completed kites and their "garishly painted" faces, which are "crude, cruel, grinning faces . . . primitively drawn" (69). Whence comes that cruelty? It might express the redirected anger and frustration the boy feels. Alone, without a father, he is a "looker-on" of life. The kites may also express, by negation, what Michael wishes he had: a part in this final tableau. They also suggest the primitive forces, repressed as well as released, that are hinted at in the celebration of Lughnasa.

As the closing monologue suggests, the final scene is about the wordless mysteries of life. Jack, Gerry, and the Mundy sisters enact these rituals as a way to find meaning in their rapidly changing lives. The rituals and symbols point to a transcendent realm, beyond the mundane and painful reality of their Irish poverty. But it remains for us to catch the truth and hope for such transcendent meaning, much as we might try to retrieve a fleeting dream or a luminous vision. Friel's daughter, Judy, produced the play on a number of occasions. She quotes the famed critic Denis Donoghue to the effect that "a problem is something to be solved, a mystery is something to be witnessed and attested" (15).²³ This is the response to mystery that *Dancing at Lughnasa* elicits.

In an increasingly secular culture, it is almost a truism of literary criticism that authors find it difficult to portray human goodness. Unless a story or a film contains violence, sex, or some unspeakable form of evil, the attention of the audience often wanes. For this reason *Dancing at Lughnasa* may be too subtle for some, and this final scene might go past the inattentive reader or playgoer. Still this is a scene of relative plentitude, if not beatitude, before the forces of history, technology, and change, together with the consequences of personal decisions, disrupt the family. Its brief moments of qualified happiness suggest a glimpse of "the good life" that awaits us all in eternity.

Dancing at Lughnasa is witness to the Catholic belief that creation is graced, but damaged. The Mundy sisters are not a Holy Family in the clichéd sense, but they are a family that expresses its love in somewhat awkward and broken attempts at care and concern for each other. Few great plays (think of some by Brecht, or Elie Wiesel's *The Trial of God*) succeed as parables. But if *Dancing at Lughnasa* is a parable of anything, it is a parable of that *koinonia*, communion or fellowship referred to earlier. It is the parable of a humble, flawed familial community, attacked by change and temptation but, at least until the play's ending, united in flawed and fragile human care and love.

In the last moments of Lughnasa the play returns us to the question that focuses Rausch's chapter: "What is the life that God calls us to?" What is "the fullness of life," the *pleroma* to which God calls us?²⁴ It is not the narrated flight of Agnes and Rose, the death of Father Jack, or the revelation of Gerry Evans's multiple deceptions.

that remains in the memory. Rather it is the picnic, a reminder of Eden and a preview of heaven. This meal together is an image of participation and communion. It symbolizes, intimates, or prefigures the ultimate graced experience referred to by Rausch of which we have all had some taste. In this way, rather than merely expounding a profound truth, it activates it.

The elder Michael's final monologue is in its own way mysterious, and it has elicited a variety of interpretations. As the characters assume "positions similar to their positions at the beginning of the play" (70), forming another tableau, Michael's memory is of dancing: "When I remember it, I think of it as dancing. Dancing with eyes half closed because to open them would break the spell. Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement—as if this ritual, this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things, to be in touch with some otherness" (71).

For some, this ending is unadulterated nostalgia. For others it is a final, wistful praise of a wordlessness that points toward the transcendent. The late poet Stanley Kunitz corroborates the truth intimated in Michael's epilogue: "There are forms of communication beyond language that have to do not only with the body, but with the spirit itself, a permeation of one's being."²⁵ A Catholic sensibility will see much more. Though the final scene has little to do with evil as such, one might be inclined to think of the things that will befall the Mundy sisters as unfortunate, sad, but at least realistic. In his book of aphorisms, *The Grain of Wheat*, von Balthasar makes a perceptive contrast between realism and grace, between a realistic way that evil has of looking at the world, and a way of looking that is informed by grace:

Evil can deceive us with a convincing "realism": in its light, all things appear close up and stripped, in the true-to-life clarity of *verismo*, rescued from that blurry and hazy atmosphere that they have on "good" days. And yet the former is the illusion and the latter the truth; in the light of faith our real contour should indeed be hazy. A Christian existence without this atmosphere is as abstract as a surrealist painting.²⁶

Even after this close analysis of two plays, someone may wonder, Where is God in *Dancing at Lughnasa*? or even Where is God in *A Man for All Seasons*? Perhaps a von Balthasarian gloss on Buber provides a plausible answer. In the following passage, von Balthasar quotes and comments on passages from *I and Thou*:

The "latency" of our relation to God, our "distance from God," the "pain of dryness"—these do not indicate that God is no longer there "but that we are

not always there" (*I and Thou* p. 99). It is the creature who must learn, through the "I-thou" relationship and "through the grace of its comings and the pains of its departures" (*I and Thou*, 33) to practice the presence of God, who is always there.²⁷

I would suggest that in reading or seeing these two plays, we need to be "always there." We must be attentive to the mystery that surrounds the characters even when they are not. If we attend to both their words and the accompanying actions, we will more clearly understand their individual characters, the nature of their relationships, and the Catholic mystery that fills their lives and the plays themselves.

NOTES

1. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama I: Prolegomena* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 12, 251.
2. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama I*, 17.
3. O'Neill's tragedies, especially *Long Day's Journey into Night*, are also redolent with the fallen-away playwright's Catholic sensibility.
4. Peter Shaffer, *Equus* (New York: Penguin, 1974), 109.
5. Peter Shaffer, *Amadeus* (New York: Perennial, 1981), 59.
6. Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* (London: Methuen Drama, 1995).
7. Primarily William Roper's *Life of Sir Thomas More* in *Two Early Tudor Lives*, edited by Richard S. Sylvester and Davis P. Harding (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1962).
8. In Wilder's play, a stage manager introduces two families and comments on the events of their lives (and deaths) that we see during two specific days in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, at the start of the twentieth century.
9. I am not claiming that Williams consciously adapts Wilder's technique. The narrator and other metatheatrical devices have been around since the medieval theater. Some of Shakespeare's best-known plays employ such devices.
10. Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (London: Faber, 1990). Except for the embodiment of an alter ego in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* or the use of techniques like the monologue structure from radio drama in *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney*, Friel's plays, including *Lughnasa*, might seem hopelessly representational to the postmodern sensibility. The use of the narrator in *Lughnasa* therefore takes on even greater significance.
11. George Steiner speaks about the importance of "re-cognition" in *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). On memory and imagination, see Monika Helwig, "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University" in *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*, edited by Anthony J. Cernera and Oliver J. Morgan (Fairfield, Conn.: Sacred Heart University, 2000); Rudolfo Nicolás, "Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry: Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today," presented at the conference Networking Jesuit Higher Education: Shaping the Future for a Humane, Just, Sustainable Globe, Mexico City, April 23, 2010.
12. On the philosophical significance of "ordinary life" since the Reformation, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 13-16, 81-3, 211-47.

13. The Incarnation, however, made it possible for certain people, the apostles, to see God in the person of Jesus.

14. Even if we see "going native," either in Ireland or Africa, as a dangerous giving in to the power of divine energy, we should recognize in such phenomena the uncontrollable outbreak or incursion of the transcendent, the divine. See Ronald Rollheiser, *The Holy Longing* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 22–31.

15. Martine Pelletier, "Whispering Private and Sacred Things: Field Day, Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* and Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy*," *Etudes irlandaises* 17, no. 1 (1992): 129–45.

16. No fewer than ten named musical pieces occur. Rose's "King of Abyssinia" (to the tune of "Coming around the Mountain"), the dance tune "The Mason's Apron" (21), "Dancing in the Dark" (32), "The Isle of Capri" (34) and "Everybody's Doing It" (37), both of which Kate refers to as "aul pagan songs," "Play to Me, Gypsy" (43), in Maggie's "usual parodic style," "O redder than the cherry" (46) by Jack, which he thinks might be Gilbert and Sullivan, Gerry's single line from "That daring young man on the flying trapeze" (54), and the final scene's "Anything Goes" (64) and "It's time to say goodnight" (71). Fellow playwright Frank McGuinness and script writer for the film version adds a musical setting of Yeats's "Down by the Salley Gardens," which is sung by all five sisters. Regarding spectacle, Aristotle refers to *opsis*, or what can be seen. Most critics, following Aristotle, narrow the concept of "spectacle" to those more or less obvious, or even sensational aspects of the play on stage, ignoring most ordinary entrances and exits and concentrating on significant actions on the stage. This would include the numerous dances in *Lughnasa*.

17. In *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007), 46, Charles Taylor speaks of feasts, festivals, and Carnival as the medieval way of dealing with the presence of chaos that existed in tension with order (and repression). In this light, the sisters' dance, if not all the dances in *Lughnasa*, hearken back to such (mythic) outbursts.

18. Critics have pointed to the influence of George Steiner's linguistic thought on Friel's *Translations*. See George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Clearly, language, speech, and wordlessness are of the essence in *Lughnasa* as well.

19. *Anagnorisis* is the Greek term Aristotle employs to define the revelatory "reversal" in classical tragedy. By including the information in a monologue, Friel minimizes any sense of surprise or climax that might detract from the point that the final scene is meant to make.

20. Both Rausch in his essay in this volume and Scripture scholar Raymond E. Brown refer to the Catholic sense of community using this term. See Brown's *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

21. Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 113.

22. See Luke 9:10–17.

23. I think it is no accident that Donoghue's phrasing resembles von Balthasar's in *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 21. *Speaking of Beauty* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), Denis Donoghue includes a response to Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), the first of von Balthasar's trilogy.

24. St. Paul, in Colossians 2:9, refers to Christ as *pleroma tes theotetos*.

25. Stanley Kunitz with Genine Lentine, *The Wild Braid: A Poet Reflects on a Century in the Garden* (New York: Norton, 2005), 53.

26. von Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat*, 104.

27. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama I*, 635.

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